

The Byzantine Empire

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff
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The history of the Byzantine Empire goes all the way back to 1,700 years ago. Over time, the empire included parts of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. It left behind a rich tradition of art, literature, and learning.

A new Rome

At first, the lands of the Byzantine Empire were part of the Roman Empire. The word "Byzantine" comes from the ancient Greek city of Byzantium. This city was on the Bosphorus, the channel of water connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.

About 1,700 years ago, the Roman Emperor Constantine I chose Byzantium as a new Roman capital and called it Constantinople. Earlier, Constantine had made Christianity the official religion of Rome. The people of Constantinople and the rest of the Eastern Roman Empire saw themselves as Romans and Christians. But many of them spoke Greek, while the main language of the Romans was Latin.

After Constantine died, the Roman Empire split into the Eastern Roman Empire and the Western Roman Empire. In the west, Rome was the capital city. Attacks from invaders made the Western Roman Empire weaker and weaker. Rome finally fell about 1,500 years ago, and the western empire ended.

The Byzantine Empire lived on

The Eastern Roman Empire was safer from attack, thanks in part to its location. Constantinople was surrounded by water on most of its sides and had very strong walls. It also had a strong government that ruled over many lands. This made it easier for leaders to gather armies and fight off invaders. The Eastern Roman Empire was able to live long after Rome fell. Historians now call it the Byzantine Empire. But the people living in it just thought of it as the Roman Empire.

The rule of Justinian

One of the great rulers of the Byzantine Empire was Justinian I. Under his rule, the empire became larger. It took over most of the land around the Mediterranean Sea. Many great buildings and monuments were built under Justinian. The most famous was the Church of Holy Wisdom, or Hagia Sophia.

When Justinian died, the Byzantine Empire was the strongest in Europe. But the army was not large enough to defend all of its lands. Over the years, outside invaders kept attacking the empire. The strongest enemies were Muslims in the east. They followed the religion of Islam and began their attacks about 1,400 years ago. They took over Egypt, northern parts of Africa and many lands in the Middle East.

7.2 The Byzantine Empire

Article Questions

Directions: As you read the “Byzantine Empire” article, answer the questions below. Make sure you are answering the questions with COMPLETE SENTENCES! You will not get full credit if you are not writing complete sentences.

1. If the Byzantine Empire goes all the way back 1,700 years, about what date did the Byzantine Empire start?
2. Why would it be difficult for the Roman Empire to be united if one half spoke Latin and the other half spoke Greek?
3. Why did the city of Constantinople survive when the city of Rome fell? (Give three examples from the article.)
4. Who was one of the great rulers of the Byzantine Empire?
5. Why would both the Roman Emperors and the Byzantine Emperors want to control the Mediterranean Sea?

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